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ABSTRACT

Vietnamese has a group of semantically amorphous indefinite words and phrases whose meanings appear to be refined according to the particular syntactic or pragmatic context in which they are embedded. In appropriate environments, they are the functional equivalents of the English "who, someone, anyone, whoever, everyone." Analysis of the occurrence of these words and phrases in Vietnamese suggests four basic contexts that welcome most or all of these indefinites and refine or elaborate their somewhat vague semantics. These include: (1) content questions; (2) situations in which the indefinite functions as an unidentified constant referent; (3) a broad category defined as "irrealis," which subsumes traditional polarity contexts and environments created by both desideratives and root and epistemic modals; and (4) the nomatterative, a semantic structure associated with a type of conditional construction. In each case, attention must be paid to whether the indefinite represents a constant or variable. The syntactic cues associated with each of these contexts are often not sufficiently reliable to prevent ambiguity about the indefinite's function, so both linguistic and extralinguistic information should be used to define these interpretive contexts. This account of indefinites highlights the range of indefinite functions made possible by their apparent lexical underspecification. (MSE)

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The Class of Indefinites in Vietnamese

Laura A. Michaelis

Introduction

Vietnamese has a repository of semantically amorphous indefinite words and phrases whose meanings appear to be refined according to the particular syntactic or pragmatic context in which they are embedded. In the appropriate environments, they are the functional equivalents of the English series represented by *who*, *someone*, *anyone*, and *whoever/everyone*, respectively. As an example, one might consider the meaning-shifts undergone by the word **ai**, often glossed as "who", when it appears in a content question (1), before a demonstrative (2), in the "polarity contexts" represented by negative sentences and by yes-no questions (3a-b), and in the syntactic construction which I will quaintly dub the "Nomatterative" (4):

(1) Cô đã thấy ai?
You past see indef-person
"Who did you see?"

(2) Cổ nói với ai đó.
She speak with indef-person that
"She spoke with someone."

(3) a. Cổ không thích ai.
She not like indef-person
"She doesn't like anyone."

b. Cô đã thấy ai, không?
You past see indef-person, no
"Did you see anyone?"

(4) Cổ đi đâu, ảnh cũng muốn đi theo.
She go indef-place, he [cũng] want go follow.
"Wherever she goes, he wants to follow."

It is my purpose here to investigate the behavior of **ai** and other indefinites in the contexts represented by (1)-(4) above. In presenting this investigation, I hope to demonstrate that these words and phrases will resist any attempt to relegate them to the syntactic category of "question

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word" or "polarity item" and that instead one might more profitably regard them as a syntactically underspecified lexical class whose sole common semantic specification seems to be that of being unconnected to any identifiable referent.

I will argue that there are four basic contexts which welcome most or all of these indefinites and which refine or elaborate their somewhat vague semantics. The first two such contexts exemplified must, it seems, be defined functionally: content questions serve as means by which to request identification of a referent, and indefinites a method of establishing an unidentified referent in discourse. The third context, a very broad one, must be defined rather vaguely as "irrealis," (a term intended to subsume traditionally recognized "polarity contexts" as well as environments created by both desideratives and root and epistemic modals). The fourth context might be viewed as the semantic structure associated with a type of conditional construction--a context which often seems closely related to the irrealis.

I hope to show that these contexts are invoked by both syntactic and pragmatic means; one cannot always determine the interpretation of an indefinite on the basis of its syntactic environment alone. Content questions, for example, are not consistently marked as such syntactically; "question words" occur predominantly *in situ* and such clause-final question particles as đó and vậy appear to be optional. Additionally, it appears that the indefinite reading exemplified in (2) (which I will refer to as the unidentified-constant reading, in order to avoid confusion with the term used to denote the generalized semantics of the class) need not always be signalled by the presence of a demonstrative following the indefinite word or phrase. (The conditions under which the demonstrative *does* serve to provide the reading of (2) will be discussed below.) This frequent lack of syntactic cues often creates ambiguity as to whether a clause containing an indefinite expression is to be interpreted as a content question or as a declarative containing an indefinite:

(5) Ông ấy có mấy quyển sách học tiếng Việt-Nam? (Hoa 1966:34)
He that have unspecified-number clf. books learn language Vietnamese
"How many Vietnamese books does he have?"
"He has some number of Vietnamese books."

It appears that, in addition to intonation, some feature of the conversational context, or of conversational interaction in general, must disambiguate such sentences as (5). The question reading certainly appears

to be the pragmatic default; sentences containing unspecified or unidentifiable referents seem in general to be far less useful conversational contributions than content questions (and indeed it has proven quite difficult to devise a context in which an informant will produce an utterance of the former type). Thus, it is perhaps the case that the ambiguity of (5) is not ordinarily apparent. It does not then appear that syntactic ambiguity necessarily creates decoding difficulties; the four contexts exemplified above are delineated by both pragmatic and syntactic means.

With this in mind, we might now proceed to examine each of the four contexts shown in (1)-(4), and the particular interpretation imposed by these contexts upon the indefinite word or phrase. One important aspect of this interpretation, which will be highlighted in the ensuing discussion, is that of whether the indefinite item is to be interpreted in a given context as a linguistic variable (an expression which may be connected to a succession of values or referents) or as a constant (an expression connected to a single entity which is unidentified within the discourse context). I hope to demonstrate that it is only in the context exemplified in sentence (2) that the indefinite item receives the latter interpretation, and, further, that this interpretation is induced by the "anchoring" function provided by the demonstrative modifier. Additionally, I hope to demonstrate that within those contexts inducing the variable-reading of indefinites, pragmatic factors often determine whether or not that variable must have a unique solution. Let us now, however, explore the behavior of indefinites within the domain exemplified in sentence (1): content questions.

Content Questions

Before proceeding to a discussion of the use of indefinites as question words, I should mention that here are some phrases that appear unique to this syntactic domain: the manner/instrument adjunct **làm sao** and the reason adjunct **tại sao**, as well as the ambiguous **sao**, do not seem to have uses in the other domains mentioned (although reason and instrument adjuncts do appear--in other forms--elsewhere). Further, phrases involving the degree marker **bao** (e.g., **bao nhiêu**, "how much, many") appear to be limited to this domain and that of the Nomatterative. As I am concerned primarily with the larger class of indefinites, I will focus my investigation upon those "question words" which appear in all or most of the domains exemplified in (1)-(4); **bao**-phrases and **sao**-phrases will, however, merit some discussion here.

As mentioned earlier, indefinites used as question words occur

predominantly *in situ*. Hence, questioned subjects and direct objects fit the SVO pattern instantiated by declarative sentences, as shown in sentences (6) and (7), respectively:

(6) a. Anh đó ở đây.
He that is-located here.
"He is here."

b. Ai ở đây?
Indef-person is-located here
"Who is here?"

(7) a. Cô đó đã thấy anh kia.
She that past see him yonder.
"She saw him."

b. Cô đó đã thấy người nào?
She that past see person indef-mod
"Who did she see?"

Among adjuncts having predicate scope, questioned place adjuncts (both locative (8) and directional (9b)) and time adjuncts (10b) (including durational modifiers (11b)) also occupy the postverbal position ordinarily reserved for such adjuncts in declarative sentences (cf. (6a), (9a), (10a), and (11a), respectively):

(8) Anh đó làm ở đâu?
He that work is-located indef-place
"Where does he work?"

(9) a. Cô đó chạy về nhà.
She that run arrive home.
"She ran home."

b. Cô đó đi đâu?
She that go where?
"Where did she go?"

(10) a. Xe lửa đã đến lúc trưa.
Train past arrive moment noon
"The train arrived at noon."

b. Cổ đã đi hồi nào vậy?
She past go moment which qst-prt.
"When did she leave?"

(11) a. Anh đó đã chạy được mười phút.
He that past run for ten minute
"He ran for ten minutes."

b. Anh đó đã chạy được bao lâu?
He that past run for how long?
"For how long did he run?"

There are, however, several exceptions to the principle that question words appear in place, all of which involve adjuncts rather than complements. The first of these involves questioned time-adjuncts of the sort shown in (10b). It seems that when the verb refers to some future action, whether or not futurity is indicated by the auxiliary **sẽ**, the temporal adjunct appears in clause-initial position. The following examples are taken from Hoa (1966: 47):

(12) a. Cô ấy đi Mỹ bao giờ?
She that go America how-many hour?
"When did she leave for America?"

b. Bao giờ cô ấy đi Mỹ?
How-many hour she that go America?
"When will she leave for America?"

It does not appear, however, that this phenomenon in unique to the domain of content questions: the respective replies to (12a-b) given by Hoa (1966: loc. cit.) appear to instantiate the same principle of adjunct placement:

(13) a. Cô ấy đi hôm qua.
She that leave yesterday
"She left yesterday."

b. Cuối tháng này cô ấy đi Mỹ.
End month this she that go America
"She will leave for America at the end of this month."

Another instance in which question words do not appear *in situ* involves the questioned reason and manner/instrument adjuncts discussed above. Although, as shown by (14a) and (15a), both clausal reason-adjuncts introduced by the conjunction **vì** ("because") and instrumental adjuncts introduced by the preposition **bằng** ("by means of") occur in clause-final

position in declaratives, both **tại sao** ("why") and **làm sao** ("how") occur in clause-initial position, as shown in (14b) and (15b):

(14) a. Ông ấy buồn vì bà ấy ốm luôn. (Hoa 1966:123)
He that is-sad because she this is-sick frequently
"He is sad because she is often sick."

b. Tại sao anh ở đây?
Why you be-located here
"Why are you here?"

(15) a. Tôi muốn trả bằng credit card.
I want pay by-means-of credit card
"I want to pay with a credit card."

b. Làm sao họ nổ máy xe này?
How one explode engine car this?
"How do you start the engine?"

A third instance in which questioned items do not appear *in situ* involves that durational modifier which accompanies achievement and accomplishment predicates. It seems that durational phrases headed by **trong** ("in") may optionally occur in clause-initial position when questioned (16b), while those occuring in declarative sentences appear limited to postverbal position (16a):

(16) a. Ảnh ngủ trong một phút.
He fall-asleep in one minute.
"He fell asleep in a minute."

b. Trong mấy tiếng cô mới sửa được cái này?
In indef-number hours you recent fix be-okay thing this
"How many hours did it take you to fix this?"

It seems that only the **trong**-headed duration adjunct can appear in clause-initial position; durational adjuncts accompanying state and activity predicates cannot apparently be preposed. Hence, adjuncts headed by **được**, exemplified in (11b), are not acceptable clause initially.

The optional preposing of the durational modifier exemplified in (16b) seems the most puzzling of the three exceptions discussed. One might argue that the preposing of time adjuncts exemplified in (12b) and (13b) has informational value; it serves to distinguish past and future in a

language in which tense is typically unmarked. Perhaps one might also argue that the clause-initial position of the reason and manner/instrument adjuncts, as shown in (14b) and (15b), reflects their sentential scope (although it is difficult to understand why a manner or instrumental adjunct should have such scope). The optional preposing of **trong**-headed durationals (16b), however, appears to be a purely stylistic device. At any rate, this discussion of displaced question words has taken us somewhat far afield of our goal--to examine the behavior of indefinites in each of the four syntactic domains exemplfied in (1)-(4). Let us now then examine the behavior of two indefinites, **gì**, commonly glossed as "what", and **nào**, commonly glossed as "which", within the content-question domain.

As shown in (17a-c), both of these indefinites serve as nominal modifiers, creating question phrases:

(17) a. Ông nào cao vậy?
Man indef-mod is-tall qst-prt
"Which man is tall?"

b. Bàn nào nặng nhất?
Table indef-mod is-heavy most
"Which table is heaviest?"

c. Cái gì mà làm ra tiếng đó vậy?
Thing indef-mod which do be-out noise that qst-prt?
"What is it that's making that noise?"

d. *Ông gì cao vậy?
man indef-mod tall qst-prt
"Which man is tall?"

While **nào** seems to modify both animates and inanimates (17a-b), **gì** apparently modifies only inanimates (17c-d). It also seems that while **gì** can function alone as an indefinite argument, **nào** cannot. It appears that **nào**, as a modifier, is prohibited from occupying an argument place. This is most clearly shown by questions of the type exemplified in (18a-b):

(18) a. Giữa hai ghế, cô ưa *(ghế) nào hơn?
Between two chair, you like chair indef-mod more
"Of the two chairs, which do you prefer?"

b. Trong hai ông, *(ông) nào cao hơn?
In two man, man indef-mod is-tall more?
"Of the two men, which is taller?"

In questions of the sort shown in (18), a set is named in the subordinate clause, and in the interrogative main clause, the addressee is asked to select a particular member of that set. The question word in the main clause is most commonly **nào**, which, as shown in (18), must appear with a pleonastic head nominal denoting the set of items in question. (English, as one might note in the translation of (18a), lacks this constraint.) Hence it seems that **nào**, unlike **gì**, is a modifer alone, and as such cannot occupy an argument position.

However, as mentioned, the indefinite **gì** can either serve as a modifier of subject and object arguments ((17c), (19a)), or it can appear alone as an indefinite argument, as in (19b),(d):

(19) a. Cô quên chữ gì?
You forget word indef-mod
"What word did you forget?"

b. Cô càn gì hôm nay?
You need indef-thing today?
"What do you need today?"

c. *(Chuyện) gì xảy ra?
Event indef-mod happen be-out?
"What happened?"

d. Có gì xảy ra vậy?
Exist indef-thing happen be-out qst-prt
"What happened?"

The use of **gì** as an indefinite argument appears to be constrained syntactically. Although in object position **gì** seems free to serve as either modifier (19a) or argument (19b); in subject position it can apparently function only as a modifier, as demonstrated by (19c). One may note that the use of the existential construction (19d), which requires a clause-initial **có** (lit. "has"), effectively "bumps" the substantively used **gì** from subject position, allowing it to serve as an argument of the serial verb **xảy ra** ("happen") without violating the subjecthood constraint observed in (19c).

Having looked at the behavior of a number of indefinites with respect to content questions, we might now consider what sort of semantic specifications are imposed by this context upon indefinites embedded within it. As mentioned, it seems that indefinite words and phrases within content questions must be interpreted as variables. Hence, a question like

(1) may be interpreted as a request of the addressee that he enumerate all members of the set of people whom he has seen; the indefinite **ai** ranges over all members of this set. Of course, variables can have unique solutions, and some contexts may require them. Thus, for example, while the indefinite **ai** in (1) can be interpreted as a variable whose solution is a set of individuals, indefinites appearing in questions involving superlatives, like (17b), must ordinarily be solved for one entity only. The questioned temporal adjunct **bao giờ** ("how many") in (12a) must also have a unique solution. This indefinite cannot be linked to a set of several departure times, since, as we know, a single trip entails no more than one departure from a given location. Such extralinguistic information is, of course, not part of the semantic specification imposed upon indefinites by the content-question context.

The content-question context, as mentioned earlier, appears to be invoked by pragmatic as well as syntactic means. It was shown above that as question words are ordinarily *in situ*, and as the clause-final content-question particles **vậy** and **đó** are apparently optional, there is the potential for such ambiguity as that shown in sentence (5). In addition to ambiguities of this sort, there may also be ambiguities of the sort exemplified by sentence (20) below, in which the irrealis and content-question contexts seem to conflate syntactically:

(20) Anh đó muốn xe nào rẻ.
He that want car indef-mod be-inexpensive
"He wants an inexpensive car."
"What inexpensive car does he want?"

In (20), the presence of the indefinite modifier **nào** can be attributed either to the irrealis context created by the desiderative verb **muốn** ("want") or to the content-question context. Again, some feature of the discourse context must allow the hearer to disambiguate those sentences which, like (20), are syntactically ambiguous.

Before proceeding to a discussion of the interpretation of indefinites in irrealis contexts, we might examine the one context in which indefinite words and phrases are interpreted as constants--unidentified but "anchored" entities.

Unidentified Constants

As mentioned earlier, many of the phrases appearing in this context can readily be glossed by words and phrases in the English "*some*-series." The difficulty here is that the claimed syntactic reflex of this context, which seems to consist of a demonstrative following the indefinite in question, does not appear to be present wherever this reading is invoked. One such example is given in (5), wherein the constant-reading of mấy ("several") is invoked without any assistance from a demonstrative modifier. Certainly such facts serve to underscore the point that the particular interpretations imposed upon indefinites in Vietnamese are pragmatically conditioned to a great degree, and yet it also appears to be the case that demonstrative modification *is* a fairly predictable concomitant of the constant-reading among particular word-classes. The indefinite nominals gì and ai, the indefinite locative đâu, and any nominal modified by the indefinite modifier nào--including those coding reason, time, and instrument adjuncts--appear to require demonstrative modification in order to be interpreted as unidentified constants.

I would like somehow to unify this use of the demonstrative with that distinguishing second persons from third, exemplified in (21):

(21) a. Anh muốn đi, không?
Male-agemate want go, no?
"Do you want to go?"

b. Anh đó muốn đi, khong?
Male-agemate that want go, no?
"Does he want to go?"

As shown in (21), the noun anh (lit. "older brother") receives a third-person interpretation when modified by a demonstrative, and a second-person interpretation when not so modified. I will attempt to explain this use of the demonstrative, as well as that which "anchors" indefinites, by appeal to Langacker's (1987) notion of an "objectively construed scene." First, however, we might examine some examples of "anchored" indefinites. Sentences (2) and (22)-(25) exemplify the use of the demonstrative to induce the "unidentified constant" interpretation of the indefinites gì, đâu, ai, and nào, respectively:

(22) a. Cổ nói cai gì đó, mà tôi không hiểu gì hết.
She said indef-thing that, but I not under indef-thing

complete
"She said something, but I didn't understand anything at all."

b. Tôi đã nghe cổ nói cai gì đó.
I past hear she say clf. indef-thing that
"I heard her say something."

(23) Anh đó đang trốn đâu đầy.
He that present hide indef-place that
"He is hiding somewhere."

(24) Cổ nói với ai đó, mà tôi không biết là ai.
She talk with indef-person but I not know be who
"She's talking with someone, but I don't know who."

(25) a. Một người nào đó đã nhìn thầy anh đó ra đi.
One person indef-mod that pask look see he that be-out go
"Someone saw him leaving."

b. Anh đó bỏ đi lúc nào đó.
He that leave go moment indef-mod that
"He left at some point."

c. Anh đó bỏ đi vì lý-do nào đó.
He that leave go because reason indef-mod that
"He left for some reason."

d. Anh đó sửa xe bằng một cách nào đó.
He that fix car by-means-of one method indef-mod that
"He fixed the car somehow."

The four sentences in (25) exemplify the use of nào to modify nominals serving as a subject argument, time adjunct, reason adjunct, and instrumental adjunct, respectively. Each of the indefinite words and phrases in (2) and (22)-(25) appears to be interpreted as being linked to a unique referent, which the speaker either cannot identify or chooses not to identify.

What is of particular importance for our purposes is the fact that the indefinite modified by a demonstrative must be linked to a unique referent; in this syntactic environment it is not a variable but a constant. I would like to argue that it is the "anchoring" function of the demonstrative modifier that induces this interpretation of the indefinite. If one can refer to a shared "discourse space," in which interlocutors can establish elements, one might be able to argue that demonstratives "anchor" or uniquely identify indefinites by somehow pointing them out in that discourse space. This notion of discourse space is rather similar to

that of the "objective scene" discussed by Langacker (1987:139-140). Langacker characterizes an "optimal viewing arrangement," in which the conceptualizer and object of conceptualization are maximally distinct, with the object of conceptualization being located within a "locus of viewing attention" which does not include the conceptualizer or "the area...contiguous to him." The objective scene is this locus of viewing attention. Typically, it seems, any addressee of the conceptualizer is excluded from the objective scene.

Although the interlocutors are ordinarily not included within the "onstage region" defined by the objective scene, Langacker argues that they may serve as "offstage reference points" for deictic modifiers. These modifiers use the relative positions of the interlocutors in the "offstage region" as a frame of reference for pointing out entities within the "onstage region" or discourse space. I would like to claim that because demonstratives function to locate items with respect to the interlocutors, those in (2) and (22)-(25) are construed as establishing their indefinite heads as particular observable entities within the objective scene. Thus, when modified by a demonstrative, the indefinite, which would otherwise be construed as a variable, is assigned a unique, although unidentified, referent within the objective scene.

As mentioned above, it seems that this approach might also provide a reasonable account of the fact that, as shown in (21), the demonstrative induces a third-person reading of a nominal that would otherwise have a second-person reading. If the objective scene does not include its viewers, the interlocutors, then the addressee is not "set up" within that scene by means of a deictic. Thus, the unmodified **anh** in (21a) has a second-person interpretation. Any party who is not among the interlocutors can, however, be included within the objective scene, and his location there might be said to be signalled by the demonstrative.

This account is, of course, somewhat sketchy and tentative. It does, however, illustrate that the "anchored" interpretation of the indefinites **nào, đâu, gì,** and **ai** can be motivated according to the semantics imposed by the modifying demonstrative. Of course, as mentioned earlier, such sentences as (5) demonstrate that this interpretation is available where no demonstrative-modification occur. It does seem, however, that where such modification is possible (viz., among the indefinites mentioned), it is necessary for this reading. Such sentences as (5), I think, merely serve to underscore the point that where syntactic cues are missing or unreliable, pragmatic information must enable one to discern the indefinite's particular interpretation. One cannot overestimate the importance of extralinguistic information in the interpretation of Vietnamse indefinites; it seems that only the Nomatterative construction provides a completely

reliable syntactic context for the interpretation of indefinites. Before examining that context, we might look at that which I have vaguely termed the "irrealis."

The Irrealis Context

The term "irrealis" is intended to subsume a number of different semantic environments which welcome indefinites, some of which are associated with syntactic constructions, and others of which belong to the frames associated with certain lexical items. Several of these environments are traditionally recognized "polarity contexts": negated clauses, yes-no questions, protases of conditionals, and comparatives. Examples of the negative and yes-no question contexts can be found in (3), examples of the latter two are given in (26)-(27):

(26) a. Nếu có ai tới thì kêu tôi.
If exist indef-person come then call me
"If anyone comes, then call me."

b. Anh cần gì thì cứ hỏi.
You need indef-thing then keep ask
"If you need anything, just ask."

(27) Ảnh cao hơn ai hết.
He is-tall more indef-person complete
"He is taller than anyone at all."

Sentence (26b) is intended to demonstrate that a protasis need not be introduced by the subordinator **nếu** ("if"), as in (26a); instead, it seems that the presence of the indefinite itself, coupled with the following resultative clause introduced by **thì** ("then") can serve to signal the antecedent-status of the initial clause. Sentence (27) demonstrates that the Vietnamese comparative construction apparently requires no comparative conjunction, but only a scalar verb followed by the comparative particle **hơn** and a following nominal. Sentence (27) also illustrates the use of the completive verb **hết** to express a meaning akin to the English *at all*. This word appears, like *at all*, to be limited to irrealis contexts. (Another such word in Vietnamese, the modifier **bất-cứ** ("any" or "random") will be investigated below.)

What, however, makes such contexts as negative sentences, protases, and comparatives "irrealis"? We might define an irrealis context in the following manner: a semantic context in which a particular state of

affairs is schematized as either in doubt, nonexistent, or not yet obtaining. Negative sentences fit this definition, as illustrated by sentence (3a): the negative không denies the state of affairs expressed by the predicate thích ("like"). Yes-no questions seem to fit the definition as well; sentences like (3b) presuppose uncertainty on the part of the speaker as to the presence of some event or state. Protases of conditionals too can be seen to adhere to the irrealis model. Conditionals code a causal relationship between one state and another--a relationship which does not entail that the causal state of affairs obtains, but merely that, should it, the caused state will also obtain. (Of course, the presence of this causal relationship does not entail that the state of affairs coded by the consequent obtain either; nevertheless, consequents in Vietnamese, as in English, do not appear to be irrealis contexts, as they do not welcome indefinites. This puzzle will not be tackled here.) Lastly, comparatives can also be seen as irrealis contexts: such assertions as (27) do not compare two particular tokens (e.g., of height values, as in (27)), but assert than *any* such comparisons will yield the same result, should they be performed.

As mentioned earlier, indefinites within the irrealis contexts are interpreted as variables. This fact can, I think, be explained in the following (somewhat vague) manner: as the schemata invoked by these contexts essentially withold or forgo realization of any state of affairs, there remains the potential for myriad possibilities of realization. This explanation seems slightly fuzzy, but I think it is intuitive. Perhaps a couple of examples will suffice. Such sentences as (27) assert that a particular individual is taller than any individual with whom he might be compared; thus this assertion subsumes any individual acts of comparison with person 1, person 2, and so on. The indefinite ai, therefore, must range over all such targets of comparison. Similarly, such yes-no questions as (3b) seek only to know whether or not some persons were sighted by a particular perceiver; satisfaction of this request includes any "sighting possibility"--no persons, one, two, and so on. Again, ai must range over all of these possibilities. Hence, irrealis contexts require that indefinites be interpreted as variables.

As mentioned earlier, I would like to claim that, in addition to the traditionally recognized polarity environments, there are other contexts in Vietnamese which can be characterized as irrealis. These include the contexts invoked by desiderative verbs and auxiliaries coding both potential and habitual modality. Examples are given in (28)-(30). Note in (28) the comparison of desiderative and nondesiderative (realis) verbs:

(28) a. Cổ mong/mơ/ có việc nào tốt hơn.
She hope/dream/ have job indef-mod be-good more
"She hopes (dreams) that she'll have a better job."

b. Cổ có việc tốt hơn.
She have job be-good more
"She has a better job."

c. Tôi muốn xe nào không đắc lắm.
I want car indef-mod not be-expensive very
"I want an inexpensive car."

d. Tôi mua một chiếc xe không đắc lắm.
I buy one clf. car not be-expensive very
"I bought an inexpensive car."

(29) a. Cổ có-thể đọc bất-cứ sách nào cổ tìm ra.
She can read random book indef-mod she find be-out
"She can read any book she finds."

b. Bất-cứ chuyện gì có-thể xảy ra ở đây.
Random event indef-thing can happen be-out here
"Anything can happen here."

(30) a. Cổ thường nói bất-cứ những gì khi cổ say.
She be-usual say random plural indef-thing when she is-drunk
"She'll say anything when she's drunk."

b. Ảnh thường làm bất-cứ những gì để thành-công.
He be-usual do random plural indef-thing purpose succeed
"He does anything to get ahead."

Comparison of (28a-b) and (28c-d) demonstrates that the indefinite modifier **nào** appears only in the irrealis environment created by the desiderative verbs **mong** ("hope for"), **mơ** ("dream of"), and **muốn** ("want"); such realis verbs as **có** ("have") do not allow indefinite objects. Sentences (29a-b) demonstrate that the modal auxiliary **có-thể** ("can") creates an environment welcoming indefinites. One might also note that both root (29a) and epistemic (29b) uses of this auxiliary create the requisite environment. As shown in (30), the auxiliary verb **thường** ("be usual"), which codes habitual activity, also welcomes indefinites.

As stated earlier, I wish to claim that each of these three types of verbs invokes an irrealis context. How do these verb classes adhere to the

irrealis model discussed above? Desiderative verbs are a fairly clear instance of this model: they express a desire for some state of affairs to come about but presuppose that such has not yet occurred. Potential verbs too fit the model quite well: they express the ability of some entity to accomplish some goal or the possibility that some event will occur, but presuppose that neither the event nor the goal currently obtains. Habitual verbs like thường ("be usual") are more difficult to reconcile with the irrealis model, as they seem to express not the lack of realization of some event but rather its repetition. Such verbs, however, may be regarded instead as expressing a tendency of some individual or entity toward some state or action, and, as such, coding a potentiality akin to that expressed by both epistemic modals and (root) modals coding ability. Habitual verbs express both an assertion about the current state of affairs and a prediction that this same state of affairs will obtain in the future. It is this latter characteristic that I think lends them their irrealis character.

As mentioned, the modifier bất-cứ ("any" or "random" lit. "no basis") appears to be a denizen of the potential (29) and habitual (30) irrealis contexts. A possible problem for this analysis of that modifier are sentences of the following sort, in which no apparent irrealis context is invoked, and bất-cứ does not modify an indefinite:

(31) Họ hỏi bất-cứ những người đang có mặt.
They question random plural person present have face
"They questioned everyone present."

In the preponderance of data, however, bất-cứ, like English *any*, does appear to be a "polarity item," and I will hence continue to regard it as such. Although, as will be shown below, this modifier also appears occasionally in Nomatterative sentences, such data do not appear to undermine its irrealis character; a suggestion will be made below that Nomatteratives, as a conditional subtype, contain protases constituting irrealis contexts. Before turning to this discussion, however, we might examine the interpretation of indefinites within the contexts of (28)-(30).

The three irrealis contexts exemplified in (28)-(30), like those discussed above, also apparently induce a variable-reading of indefinites embedded within them. One example might here suffice to illustrate this. Such desiderative verbs as muốn ("want") entail the lack of fulfillment of some desire, and hence their objects range over the myriad possibilities for fulfillment of that desire. Thus, in (28c), it is asserted that whatever inexpensive car is selected, it will satisfy the speaker. (Again, whether or not a variable will have a unique solution is apparently pragmatically

determined.) It should be emphasized that although particular lexical items and syntactic constructions induce irrealis contexts, such cues do not always prevent confusion with other contexts welcoming indefinites. This fact is shown by sentence (20). Pragmatic information apparently provides a means of disambiguation.

Since pragmatic information provides a frame in which to interpret an indefinite when sufficient syntactic cues are absent, one would not wish to claim that each of the four contexts discussed here constitute distinct syntactic constructions. I will claim, however, that one context--the Nomatterative--does have constructional status, because of its consistent syntactic manifestation and the particular semantics associated with that syntactic structure.

As mentioned earlier, the claim that there are four discrete pragmatic/semantic contexts welcoming indefinites--let alone discrete constructions--may be a somewhat artificial one. It seems, for example, that Nomatteratives can incorporate a number of items which we claimed to create irrealis contexts. Such a blending of irrealis and Nomatterative contexts is exemplified in (32b), in which the desiderative verb thích ("like") appears in a Nomatterative. A nonNomatterative paraphrase of this sentence is given in (32a):

(32) a. Cổ thích chọc bất-cứ người nào thấp.
She like tease random person indef-mod be-short
"She likes to tease anyone who is short."

b. Người nào thấp cổ cũng thích chọc
Person indef-mod be-short she c. like tease
"Whoever is short, she likes to tease."

Such data demonstrate that the irrealis and Nomatterative environments are not discrete contexts. Further, Nomatteratives can not only incorporate irrealis predicates but, as mentioned earlier, also apparently represent a conditional subtype. As such, they contain protases, which were claimed to constitute irrealis environments--the irrealis modifier bất-cứ ("any") is often found there. There is, however, a difficulty for the view that Nomatterative protases simply constitute an irrealis environment: it seems that the Nomatterative protasis can include a class of items that is apparently excluded from the irrealis contexts enumerated above: bao-phrases of extent. Before investigating this issue in more detail, however, we should turn to an examination of the Nomatterative construction.

The Nomatterative

The Nomatterative construction, exemplified in sentences (4) and (32b), appears to have two major subtypes. These subtypes are defined according to their clause structure; for this purpose I assume a clause to have, minimally, a subject position filled by a nonindefinite nominal. Firstly, there is the biclausal type, in which the second clause may or may not contain a nonsubject gap into which an argument of the first clause can be integrated. Second, there is the monoclausal type, in which a clause-initial indefinite is immediately followed by either a predicate or a full clause containing a nonsubject gap into which that indefinite can be integrated. In all types, the apparently unglossable word **cũng** must follow the subject of the sole or main clause, whether that subject is an indefinite nominal (in a monoclausal structure) or a definite nominal. The structures of these four subpatterns are summarized in (33); examples of each are given in (34)-(35) below:

(33) **Nomatterative Subtypes**

A shared precedence constraint: the indefinite word or phrase must precede the boundary-marker **cũng** and the subject of apodosis must also precede **cũng**.

a. Biclausal
   i. Nonindefinite) subjects in both protasis and apodosis; nongapped object position in apodosis
   ii. (Nonindefinite) subjects in both protasis and apodosis; gapped object position in apodosis filled by indefinite object of protasis
b. Monoclausal
   i. Indefinite nominal comprising protasis serves as subject of predicate following **cũng** (i.e., appearing in apodosis)
   ii. Indefinite nominal comprising protasis serves as nonsubject argument of apodosis

(34) a. **Cổ làm gì, cổ cũng không được thành-công.**
She do indef-thing, she c. not be-able succeed
"Whatever she did, she could not succeed." (33a-i)

b. **Cổ gặp ai, cổ cũng cám ơn hết.**
She meet indef-person, she c. thank complete.
"Whoever she meets, she thanks."(33a-ii)

(35) a. Ai cũng học được tiếng Việt.
Indef-person c. learn can language Vietnamese
"Everyone can learn Vietnamese." (33b-i)

b. Cái gì con chó cũng ăn.
Clf indef-thing clf. dog c. eat
"The dog eats everything." (33b-ii)

The sentences in (34) exemplify the biclausal Nomatterative subtype (33a). Sentence (34a) exemplifies the subtype in which neither of the two clauses contains a gap (33a-i). In this sentence, the subjects of the two clauses are coreferential; the biclausal subtype exemplified in sentence (4) is identical to that of (34a), but here there is no coreference relation between the arguments of the two clauses. Sentence (34b) exemplifies the biclausal Nomatterative subtype in which the second clause contains a nonsubject gap (33a-ii); here the object position of the verb cảm ơn ("thank") is gapped, and the indefinite ai, the object of the first clause, is integrated into that position.

The two sentences in (35) represent the monoclausal Nomatterative subtype (33b). In sentence (35a), an instance of subpattern (33b-i), the indefinite ai also serves as subject of the predicate học được ("can learn"), simultaneously satisfying the two precedence constraints of (33). In sentence (35b), an instance of subpattern (33b-ii), the indefinite phrase, cái gì, represents a "preposed" object of the verb ăn ("eat"); it precedes the subject of the clause into which it is to be integrated.

Such preposing as that exemplified in (35b) seems to be necessitated by the following constraint upon Nomatteratives, mentioned in (33): the indefinite phrase must appear in the protasis (that portion of the structure which precedes the clause/predicate containing or introduced by cũng). While it may seem strange to refer to a single (indefinite) word or phrase in a monoclausal Nomatterative as a protasis (or, for that matter, to refer to a subjectless predicate as an apodosis), it does seem that the construction has a bipartite structure: the first clause, containing the indefinite, establishes a variable; the second clause describes a state of affairs held to remain constant given any value of that variable. The word cũng provides a boundary of sorts between these two components: that coded by the indefinite word/phrase or the clause containing it, and that coded by the following predicate or clause. Any indefinite word, whether embedded in a clause or not, must apparently precede the boundary-marker cũng in the Nomatterative construction.

This condition is satisfied by the biclausal Nomatterative subtype

(33a) without any deviation from the basic pattern, established above, whereby objects and various adjuncts follow the verb (let us call it SVX); any indefinite nonsubject argument in the clausal protasis will automatically precede the cũng-bearing apodosis. Similarly, among monoclausal Nomatteratives (33b), when the indefinite word or phrase represents the subject of the main clause (as in subpattern (33b-i)), it will thereby precede the subjectless apodosis introduced by **cũng**. XSV order is only necessary within the monoclausal Nomatterative subtype (33b-ii), wherein the indefinite of the protasis represents an object or other nonsubject argument of the main verb of the apodosis.

It should be noted that the Nomatterative subtype (33b-ii) must also include examples of the following kind, wherein the main clause object is also a subject of its clausal modifier (recall that biclausal status is accorded only to those Nomatteratives having nonindefinite subjects in both protasis and apodosis (33a)):

(36) Ai ở đó, họ cũng hỏi.
Who be-located there they c. question
"They questioned whoever was present."

In (36), a Nomatterative paraphrase of (31), the modified indefinite phrase represents the second argument of the verb hỏi ("question"); it must appear in clause-initial position in order to proceed the apodosis marked by cũng. Such sentences as (36), which may appear biclausal, must be distinguished from such "true" biclausal structures as (34b). Although in both (34b) and (36) the main verb contains an object gap, in (34b) that gap is "filled" by an indefinite word representing an object, rather than a subject, within the protasis. Hence, the constraint that indefinites must appear in the protasis (i.e., pre-**cũng** position) requires a deviation from SVX order in the monoclausal (36), but not in the biclausal (34b), wherein SVX order is preserved in both protasis and apodosis. The shift to XSV word order among such Nomatteratives as (35b) and (36) can be viewed as means by which to adhere to the construction's protasis-apodosis template, within which the indefinite word or phrase must precede the boundary-marker **cũng**.

As established in (33), the Nomatterative also requires that the word **cũng** immediately follow the subject of the main verb. That this ordering constraint is sensitive to subjecthood rather than to the ranking of semantic roles, for example, is demonstrated by data of the following sort:

(37) Ảnh ấy làm gì, ảnh cũng bị lính cảnh-sát bắt.
He that do indef-thing, he c. clf. police catch
"Whatever he did, he got caught by the police."

In sentence (37), which belongs to subtype (33a-i), the word **cũng** immediately follows **ảnh** ("he"), which is linked to a lower-ranking semantic role (that of patient) than is the noun **cảnh-sát** ("police"), which represents an agent. Because the apodosis is in the passive voice, however, the noun bearing the lower-ranking semantic role stands in subject position, while that bearing the higher-ranking semantic role is relegated to peripheral status. It is the patient-subject, rather than the backgrounded agent, which apparently must precede **cũng**. This fact substantiates the claim that it is the subject of the sole or main clause which must necessarily precede **cũng**, rather than the highest ranking semantic role in that clause (although the two typically conflate). The fact that the constraint upon the placement of **cũng** must be stated with respect to subjecthood appears to provide evidence for the saliency of that grammatical function in Vietnamese.

Having examined each of the two precedence constraints set out in (33), we should briefly consider the manner in which these two constraints interact with one another. It was claimed that both the indefinite word/phrase and the subject of the sole or main clause (apodosis) must precede the boundary-marker **cũng**. Among the biclausual subpatterns, the indefinite, as the object of the verb of the protasis, will necessarily not only precede this boundary marker, but also the main-clause subject. In the monoclausal subpattern (33b-i), the indefinite is necessarily also the main-clause subject, and hence both precedence constraints are fulfilled simultaneously. With respect to subpattern (33b-ii), however, the question arises as to whether the indefinite word or phrase must always precede the subject of the apodosis (as in (35b) and (36), e.g.), or whether the subject can sometimes also precede the indefinite. It appears that both orderings are possible, as demonstrated by the following sentences, which contain a preposed indefinite time-adjunct (cf. (10a)):

(38) a. Lúc nào nó cũng không đủ ăn.
Time indef-mod he c. not have-enough eat
"He never had enough to eat."

b. Tôi thì lúc nào cũng nghèo
I topic-marker time indef-mod c. be-poor
"I'm always poor."

Such data show that the statement of the constraint in (33)--wherein both subject and indefinite are required to precede the boundary-marker cũng, but neither subject nor indefinite is required to precede the other--is the correct formulation, at least for such cases as (38).

Having investigated some of the syntactic constraints imposed by the Nomatterative construction, we might now turn to its semantic structure. As mentioned, this construction might best be regarded as a type of conditional sentence in which the following type of relationship is asserted to obtain between antecedent and consequent: no matter what value is assumed by a particular variable (which codes some type of condition) that condition will have no effect upon the state of affairs at issue. The invariant state of affairs is coded by the cũng-bearing apodosis and the variable is, of course, coded by the indefinite word or phrase in the protasis. This then is another context in which the indefinite item is assigned its variable-interpretation. Again, the presence of this reading within this context is readily understandable, given that the construction is used to make an assertion that an outcome will remain constant given any or all values assumed by the variable.

As mentioned earlier, there appears to be some overlap between the Nomatterative and irrealis contexts--the Nomatterative can incorporate such irrealis items as desiderative verbs and, since protases of conditionals were shown to be irrealis contexts, it might seem that the Nomatterative, as a conditional subtype, contains an irrealis environment in its protasis. Such overlaps makes it difficult to know whether to regard an indefinite in a Nomatterative as licensed by it or by the irrealis context it subsumes. The claim that Nomatterative protases are irrealis contexts is supported by the fact that, as mentioned, the modifier bất-cứ, which is apparently confined to irrealis contexts, can appear in the subordinate clause of a Nomatterative sentence. Sentences (39), an instance of subtype (33b-ii), provides an example of this phenomenon:

(39) Bất-cứ cái gì ổng cũng đã làm.
Random clf. indef-thing he c. past do
"Whatever it is, he's done it."

This claim might, however, be impeached by the fact that, as mentioned above, it seems that while bao-phrases coding extent are apparently

excluded from the irrealis contexts examined, they appear quite comfortable in Nomatteratives, as shown in (40):

(40) Cổ chạy bao nhiêu, cổ cũng không trốn được.
She run how much she c. not escape be able
"However much she ran, she could not escape."

Such data may indicate that, if the Nomatterative is in fact a type of conditional, its protasis is not completely comparable to that of the "ordinary" conditionals given in (26a-b). At any rate, despite its overlap with the irrealis context, the particularized syntax and semantics of the Nomatterative seem to justify its being accorded the status of both a distinct grammatical construction and a separate context for indefinites. In fact, as mentioned earlier, the Nomatterative construction, with its highly specialized syntax, appears to constitute the only context which does not allow ambiguities of indefinite-interpretation.

Conclusion

What has, I hope, been demonstrated here is that an adequate description of the class of indefinites in Vietnamese cannot focus upon a single usage, such as that in content questions or negative sentences, but must instead examine the range of contexts in which these words and phrases appear. It was here shown that one might regard the class of indefinites as having a rather vague associated semantics, which is refined or elaborated by the semantic structures associated with the particular contexts in which they appear. Four such contexts were isolated here, and the function of the indefinite within each was described, with particular attention paid to the question of whether the indefinite in a particular context represents a constant or a variable. It was shown here that the syntactic cues associated with each of these contexts are often not sufficiently reliable to prevent ambiguity as to the function of the indefinite. Thus, it was argued that both linguistic and extralinguistic information should be regarded as defining these interpretive contexts. This account of the indefinites, incorporating the notion of contextual meaning, allows one to avoid the dubious claim that any one of these contexts is more "basic" than another, and instead highlights the range of functions of the indefinites made possible by their apparent lexical underspecification.

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